

## The day a black man, Jack Johnson, changed the boxing world

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**AT a time when black Americans could be lynched just for whistling at white women, Jack Johnson promoted himself as the world's biggest stud.**

The son of slaves, he bowed to no man, scandalising the early 20th century and changing the world of sport forever in Australia on Boxing Day, 1908.

Before a jeering, almost all-white crowd at Sydney Stadium, Johnson claimed the heavyweight boxing championship of the world, humiliating the white titleholder and shattering society's foundations of racial superiority.

When he wasn't battering white men to a bloody pulp, Johnson trampled on society's sexual taboos, living with a succession of white prostitutes.

As crowds of Sydney girls flocked to see the big, black exotic Texan training for his historic bout, he even stuffed heavy gauze bandages down his tights to fatten his reputation.

When most white men still got around in horse and cart, he dressed in furs and diamonds and roared about recklessly in the most expensive automobiles. And in Sydney on this day exactly 100 years ago, he proved that he was stronger, faster, tougher, and smarter than the bravest champion the white race could muster.

"When whites ran everything, Jack Johnson took orders from no one," Ken Burns wrote in his documentary *Unforgivable Blackness*.

"To most whites and even to some African-Americans, Johnson was a perpetual threat, profligate, arrogant, amoral -- a dark menace and a danger to the natural order of things."

Johnson had been considered the uncrowned world champion for years when he began chasing Canada's stocky little world titleholder Tommy Burns around the planet for a chance at the crown. Blacks had always been denied an opportunity at the big show but Johnson was not a man to give up on his heavyweight ambitions.

When Burns came to Australia to fight Bill Squires and Bill Lang, Johnson hounded him everywhere, daring him to prove that white was might. Finally, Sydney entrepreneur Hugh D McIntosh, sensing a fortune from a "race war", offered Burns \$US30,000 (about \$A2 million in today's money), an offer Burns couldn't refuse.

"Huge Deal" McIntosh was a former Broken Hill silver miner who made a fortune selling pies outside Randwick Racecourse and went on to become a newspaper magnate and politician. He was the first sponsor of Sydney rugby league and later hobnobbed in Hollywood, once trying to seduce Rudolph Valentino's lesbian wife with a ring from Tutankhamen's tomb.

He had also built the world's biggest boxing arena -- Sydney Stadium -- prompted by The Daily Telegraph's boxing writer George Wynne -- on an old market garden at Rushcutters Bay.

Writers -- including the American novelist Jack London, who like most of the reporters voiced loud support for the white champion -- travelled from all corners of the globe to cover the fight.

Racism was rife. *Illustrated Sporting* urged its readers to pray for the white man to "belt the coon into oblivion" and artist Norman Lindsay depicted Johnson as half man, half ape.

Burns prepared for the fight at the plush Hydro Majestic Hotel in the Blue Mountains, while Johnson set up camp at the more modest Sir Joseph Banks Hotel in Botany alongside a former New York prostitute, Hattie McLay, one of many Mrs Johnsons in his life.

Sydney girl Lola Toy even sued the Referee newspaper for \$200,000 in today's money after it reported a claim that Johnson wanted to marry her.

By Boxing Day, Sydney was agog with fight fever -- 20,400 fans filled the vast wooden stadium and another 40,000 waited outside for news. Burns told reporters that he would attack Johnson's body, because "niggers" had thick skulls.

"I'll beat this nigger or my name's not Tommy Burns," he said.

In fact his name wasn't really Tommy Burns -- he was actually born Noah Brusso -- and as Jack London was to report, once the bell rang the little champ had as much chance as "a dewdrop in hell". "The fight?" London wrote, "There was no fight. No Armenian massacre could compare with the hopeless slaughter." Burns hit the deck within seconds of the opening bell and for the next 14 rounds suffered a public flogging. Johnson toyed with him -- a grown man cuffing a naughty child, as London wrote -- emasculating white men around the world at the same time.

All the while Johnson flashed his gold capped teeth in a dazzling smirk that only exacerbated Burns' agony.

"Cahm on leedle Tahmmy," he would drawl, before cutting Burns' face some more.

"What's wrong Tahmmy? You hit like a girl."

Burns, exhausted and broken, flailed away helplessly, cursing his tormenter through shredded lips.

"Stand and fight, nigger," he screamed at one stage, "Fight like a white man."

Johnson was finally declared the winner in round 14 when the local police stopped the massacre.

History had been made but a dark pall descended over the noon-day crowd.

While black newspapers in America celebrated Johnson's win as the greatest event for Negroes since the abolition of slavery, Fairplay magazine lambasted the new heavyweight champion of the world as a "huge, primordial ape".

The Bulletin declared Johnson's taunting of Burns so objectionable that if he had tried it in America he would have been shot dead -- and with good reason. And journalist Randolph Bedford described Burns' defeat as beautiful sunlight being snuffed out by ugly darkness.

Race riots and lynchings greeted Johnson's victory in America.

But black had finally triumphed over white in what was then the greatest sporting event of all time.

After Boxing Day 1908, sport -- and society -- would never be the same.